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# Ancestral worship and filial piety: A perspective of older Chinese migrants

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# Background of this paper

- My PhD thesis
- My personal experience - “the greatest regret that a child could have is an eternally lost opportunity of serving his or her parents with medicine and soup on their deathbed and not being present when they die” (Li, 2010, p.172).



# Methods

- Three semi-structured interviews were conducted between April 2008 and September 2009.
- All participants took part in the first two interviews which employed the Western episodic interview technique.
- Ten participants participated in the third interview which employed an indigenous Chinese interview technique—*fangtan* (Li, 2010).
- *Fangtan*, a Chinese phrase, is comprised of two Chinese words: *fang* and *tan*. *Fang* means interviewing and asking questions, while *Tan* means dialogues and dialogical discussions.



# Methods

- Research participants are 14 males and 18 females ranging in age from 62 to 77 years.
- All participants were new migrants from the People's Republic of China.
- At the time of the initial interview, 22 participants lived with their spouse or lived alone, and 10 lived with their adult children.
- The participants' primary source of income was social benefits of no more than NZ\$10,000 per annum.
- Prior to moving to New Zealand, the majority were employed as professionals including engineers, medical doctors, nurses, teachers, physiotherapists, and managers.



## Literature: From early Confucian texts to ancestral worship in China and abroad today

- In the Chinese culture, the most predominant value relating to the care of older people is “*Xiao*” (孝), or filial piety.
- In Chinese, the character of *Xiao* (孝) is composed from two other characters: *Lao* (老, old) on the top and *Zi* (子, son) at the bottom.
- Traditionally, filial piety prescribes the child’s obligations to defer to parental wishes, attend to parental needs, and provide care and support to aged parents (Whyte, 2004).



## Literature: From early Confucian texts to ancestral worship in China and abroad today

- Paying respect to ancestors is incorporated within the filial piety belief system and manifested in mourning and ancestral worship rituals.
- Confucius (1999) stated, “While they are alive, serve them according to ritual. When they die, bury them according to ritual and sacrifice to them according to ritual” (p. 11-12).



## Literature: From early Confucian texts to ancestral worship in China and abroad today

- Confucius (1885) viewed funerals as ceremonies that demonstrate that “we do not forget him to whom we trace our root” (p. 131).
- In Confucian political philosophy, the State is required to encourage the filial piety of its officials by ensuring that they mourn their parents properly.



# Literature: From early Confucian texts to ancestral worship in China and abroad today

- Ancestral worship in contemporary China has undergone considerable transformations.
- Wang (2004) proposes that ancestral rites were revolutionised when the Communist Party of China assumed power in 1949.
- Ancestral worship was regarded as contradictory to the State's demand for public adherence to Communism.
- However, in the past two decades some elements of the traditional ancestral worship have been restored.



## Literature: From early Confucian texts to ancestral worship in China and abroad today

- For Chinese immigrants, ancestor worship can be symbolic of cultural heritage (Tan, 2004), of China as the ancestral homeland (Pan, 1999) and of their Chineseness.
- Participation in such rituals provides some cultural continuity across countries.
- For older immigrants, ancestor worship relates to the Chinese philosophy that life has come full circle—“*Luoye guigeng*” (落叶归根, literally means falling leaves returning to their roots) (Mah, 1999).



## Ancestral worship and filial piety: A perspective of older Chinese migrants to New Zealand

- *The only purpose for me to go back China was to visit my aged parents. I returned to China last year when my mother was seriously sick... However, I was not with her when she died. My mother gave me birth, raised me, educated me...I didn't even attend her funeral. This is the biggest regret in my life. (sobbing) (Xia, 66 yr-old female, living in NZ for 7yrs & 4mths)*



## Ancestral worship and filial piety: A perspective of older Chinese migrants to New Zealand

- *The first thing I would like to do during my next trip to China is to pay respect to my mother, and burn scent and paper goods in front of her grave. I would not be a complete self if I didn't do that. (Xia)*



## Ancestral worship and filial piety: A perspective of older Chinese migrants to New Zealand

- *My daughter is very filial. She is living in a Western country. On the anniversary of her father's death, she wrote a letter to report our family affairs to her father and read it in front of her father's photo. She then burned a cheque. She has done this for 19 years since her father died. (Tong, 70 yr-old female, living in NZ for 12 yrs & 6 mths)*



## Ancestral worship and filial piety: A perspective of older Chinese migrants to New Zealand

- *I took my grandson to China with me in a hope that he could learn something about the Chinese culture. We paid respect to his late grandfather and our ancestors. He showed great interest in the ritual of the ancestral worship. He kept asking me questions about the procedure of the worship. I explained to him the processes and meanings of the worship. He may not understand now. But I hope, with the help of photos we took, he will understand when he grows up. (Tong)*



## Ancestral worship and filial piety: A perspective of older Chinese migrants to New Zealand

- *I would return to China when I am very sick. I wish I could return to my roots as a falling leaf.*
- (Lee, 70 yr-old male, living in NZ for 7 yrs & 4 mths)

## Ancestral worship and filial piety: A perspective of older Chinese migrants to New Zealand

- *In 2002, my husband was diagnosed with cancer. He was hospitalised for seven months in New Zealand. However, his health condition became worse and worse. He decided to return to China. Three months later, he passed away. He finally returned to his roots. Our children now all live in China. They pay respect to their father every year. (Ping, 73 yr-old female, living in NZ for 7 yrs)*



## Ancestral worship and filial piety: A perspective of older Chinese migrants to New Zealand

- *I am not sure where my roots are. My understanding of roots is that wherever you would like to live in your later life is where your roots are. Therefore, my roots are now in New Zealand. People may claim that China is where their roots are. But, China has changed. The roots are not the same as they were before you moved to New Zealand. (Tong, 68 yr-old female, living in NZ for 8 yrs & 5 mths)*



# Conclusion

- Ancestral worship is considered as an opportunity to express gratitude to the deceased parent(s) and ancestors.
- It is also a means for the successive generations, in particular New Zealand born generations, to connect themselves to their ancestral homeland and establish a sense of Chineseness.
- The practice of “falling leaves returning to their roots” contributes to the participants’ cultural heritage that shapes one’s life in the present.



Nau te rourou, naku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi.

With you basket and my basket we will all prosper.

Tena koutou

Tena koutou

Tena tatou katoa.